

FOREWORD BY SIMON SINEK

PERMISSION TO

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How I Learned to Lead by Doing
(Almost) Everything Wrong

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This is a special preview excerpt from

**PERMISSION TO SCREW UP:
How I Learned to Lead by
Doing (Almost) Everything
Wrong**

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It's a hundred-degree day in the middle of a scorching Florida summer.

I'm sitting in a comfy armchair, right smack in the middle of a beautifully decorated, air-conditioned apartment clubhouse where the residents congregate to play pool and watch football. I'm checking Facebook and texting my friends to make plans for the evening, and every few seconds, my eyes flick to the big clock on the wall in front of me.

It's been three hours, I think to myself. *Hope they're okay out there.*

Outside, sixty fellow college students, all of whom I hired within the last couple weeks, are scrubbing their way through hundreds of empty apartments, attempting to rid them of the filth left behind by the previous tenants—an incredibly tough job, especially when some of those tenants were frat guys (and roaches) who lived there for years without ever so much as lifting a toilet brush. Doubly tough when the AC units are down for maintenance and your novice boss doesn't even think to offer you a water break.

I contemplate checking on them but talk myself out of it. They had to have known what they were getting themselves

into with a cleaning job. And anyway, they only have to do it for three weeks. Plus, I told them if they needed me, I'd be in the clubhouse.

I prop up my feet, put in my earbuds, and tell myself I have it all under control.

As you might have guessed, it doesn't take long for things to go south.

Like, way south.

—

Hours later, I'm still perched in my armchair, congratulating myself on how well the day is going so far. We're more than halfway through, and no one has run into a single problem yet (well, no one has *told* me about any problems, at least).

As I'm about to take the first bite of the Caesar salad I just had delivered, the clubhouse doors swing open, and my employees suddenly start shuffling through single file. It's not just a few of them: As I watch, fork halfway to my mouth, *forty-five* out of sixty of them crowd into the room.

For a split second, I think they're finished cleaning—which would be surprising, considering the amount of work I assigned them this morning—until I catch sight of their faces.

As they spot me, freshly showered, with my hair done and makeup meticulously applied, every single one of them scowls.

Yeesh. Why so serious?

“Hey, guys! How’s it going?” I ask cheerfully, trying to lighten the mood.

Silence.

As they continue to make their way toward me, I can’t help but cringe a little. They’re all dripping in sweat. There are huge black grease marks on their arms and faces from scrubbing ovens and who knows what else, and they smell like a gross combo of body odor and moldy refrigerator.

“Bet you can’t wait to shower!” I joke awkwardly, desperate for just *one* of them to crack a smile.

More silence.

What is going on?

Suddenly they start whispering to one another, and they begin nudging one person forward. I hear someone say something that sounds like “Do it.”

Little do I know that I am about to experience the most humiliating thirty seconds of my life.

Slowly, one steps in front of the group. And then, carefully avoiding eye contact with me, she says, “We quit.”

I almost drop my fork.

Wait . . . wh . . .

Before I can even think of a response, all forty-five of them turn around at exactly the same moment and begin to make their way out the big double glass doors, dragging their vacuums, buckets, and sponges with them.

Forty-five people quit.

At the *same time*.

Seventy-five percent of my team.

That's the moment that inspired my obsession with learning how to be a better leader.

I had no idea what I was in for when I started a cleaning company that hires only students while I was *still in college*. I—a millennial with hardly any leadership experience—decided I would hire other millennials—a notoriously tough group to work with and retain—to do backbreaking, dirty, physical labor that would include cleaning filthy toilets and scouring mildewy bathtubs. Somehow, I thought it would be easy. Ha.

It was anything but easy. I didn't know the first thing about building a business, let alone one that's part of an industry as unenticing as housecleaning. The day forty-five people walked out on me foreshadowed the many trials I'd face as a leader, which would only get more and more difficult. But with time, patience, and a lot of screwing up, I eventually learned how to overcome the challenges I had unwittingly taken on.

This is the true, imperfect story of how I went from that humiliating summer day to where I am now. It's about how I built a company where people want to be, and where millennials are loyal, productive, and empowered. Even as they do someone else's dirty work.

But before we get to all that, let's back up a bit. To the beginning.

I need to explain how I ended up in that clubhouse in the first place. You see, it was never even my intention to start a company.



In my sophomore year of college, I was studying finance at the University of Florida. Why finance? Well, I scoured Monster.com for the highest-paying jobs, and investment banking was at the top of the list. My dream was to move to Manhattan after graduation and get a job on Wall Street that paid a starting salary of no less than \$100K per year.

At the moment, however, I was—as most college students are—broke. I had a scholarship, but it barely covered my expenses. This became a problem for me when I walked into the mall and fell in love with a pair of \$99 jeans. (Designer jeans and living beyond my means: my nineteen-year-old self in a nutshell.)

I called my dad to see if he might be willing to help with my fashion emergency, even though I knew he'd say no. (If you saw what my dad wears every day, you'd understand that fashion is not exactly an emergency in his eyes.) He told me the one thing I didn't want to hear: Get a job.

Getting a job just to buy one pair of jeans sounded a bit extreme, and besides, college was my chance to live it up before I made it to the real world and had to work for the rest of my life. Scholarships had my basic needs covered. I didn't want a job with demanding, inflexible hours getting in the way of studying for midterms (or tailgating at football games), so I decided to figure out a way I could make the money quickly on my own.

This entrepreneurial way of thinking wasn't new to me: I've been a self-starter since I was six, when I started a

babysitting service (even though I still needed a babysitter myself) and sold fake nails made of Elmer's glue to my first-grade classmates. After that came the Girls Club, a "friendship" club that members had to pay \$5 to join. They also had to follow my thirteen rules (the seventh of which was simply "Obedience"). I signed the list, "Thanks, Your Leader, Kristen." Yeah. Definitely the same thing as friendship.

So when I found myself needing \$99 in college, I wasn't in completely uncharted territory. Because Elmer's glue nails were no longer the hot commodity they were in elementary school, I went with the first viable enterprise that came to mind: cleaning. I figured it would be the best way to make enough money to buy my coveted denim in one go. I was willing to do whatever it took to get those jeans, even if it meant scrubbing a stranger's bathtub.

I put an ad on Craigslist to clean just one house. It went live on a Monday:

NEED HOUSECLEANING HELP? UNBEATABLE SERVICE AND PRICE

UF student will clean your entire house for \$99 (plus tax). I've never been arrested, convicted of a crime, or anything else like that. I'm an extremely good student and have made the Dean's list each semester. I have a 3.8 GPA. Available immediately.

(I may have rounded up a bit on the GPA.)

By the end of the day, I had a potential customer: a busy

mom with a traveling husband, two dogs, two kids, and one messy four-thousand-square-foot house. She emailed me asking for a list of references and wanted to know if I supplied my own products.

References? Hmm.

I gave her the name and phone number of my aunt and my boyfriend at the time. I didn't tell her who they were—just that they were “previous clients” of mine. Luckily, she didn't call them.

Supply my own products? I think I can do that. . . .

I looked under my kitchen sink and found a bottle of glass cleaner and a sponge. I figured I could use my own toilet scrubber. (Gross.)

Yep, got everything I need.

She asked me the soonest date I had available, and we agreed on the following Wednesday afternoon. She gave me her address, and that was that.

The night before the big day, I went out to celebrate my friend's twenty-first birthday—which, predictably, meant I wasn't exactly feeling that great when I woke up. I slept through several alarms and desperately wished I could reschedule, but then I remembered the jeans. That's all it took to get me out of bed.

I pulled into the driveway just in time.

Wow, this place is huge!

I got out of my car, grabbed my small bag of cleaning supplies, and rang the doorbell.

“Hello!” she said as she cracked open the door, holding the collars of two horse-sized dogs as they tried to jump all

over me. They were clearly dying to eat me alive. “Don’t worry!” she said. “They’re harmless! Come on in.”

I stepped into her house. It felt like a sauna.

“Sorry it’s so hot,” she said. “Our AC unit is broken.”

Faaaaantastic.

Head pounding and already breaking a sweat, I followed her to the kitchen as she locked the dogs behind a doggie gate that looked like it couldn’t prevent a Chihuahua from escaping.

“You can put your cleaning supplies here,” she instructed, pointing to the dining room. “I’m sure you have more to get out of your car, but I don’t have a lot of time, so perhaps you can get them after I give you a tour?”

“Sure!” I said.

More supplies to get out of my car? Nope, this is it. Hope that isn’t a problem.

“So here’s the kitchen, and the big thing here, as you know, is using the right products on the glass stove top.”

I didn’t know.

As I followed her from room to room, I quickly learned there was a *lot* I didn’t know about housecleaning.

Make all beds with hospital corners? Remove mildew in the master shower? What does mildew even look like?

She continued giving instructions as she gave me the tour, but I couldn’t keep up. I knew this probably wouldn’t end well.

“Okay, I think that’s it!” she concluded. “Any questions?”

“I think I’m good!” I said in my fake-confident voice.

“Great. Well, I need to get back to the office. By the way,

how long do you think it will take? Just want to time it right with bringing the kids home.”

Let's see. Four thousand square feet. Umm . . .

“Two hours?” Sounded reasonable to me.

“Wow! You're quick!” she exclaimed as she walked out the door. “Call me if you have any trouble!”

I decided to clean her daughter's bedroom first. By the time I'd removed the five million Barbies covering the floor and meticulously dusted three shelves of porcelain dolls, an hour had gone by.

I needed to pick up the pace. I went through the house, gathered all the laundry, and stuffed as much as I could into the washer. Then I moved on to the kitchen.

Special products for the glass stove top . . . like glass cleaner? Perfect. That's the one product I have with me. What are the odds?

Thirty minutes later, I realized my off-brand Windex was *not* cutting it; there were still grease spots everywhere. My two-hour time limit was up, and I had successfully straightened up one wing of the house and semicleaned the kitchen.

How was this taking so long? Even the dogs were judging me.

I decided to call her. I told her it would take another hour, and she was okay with that but warned me she would be coming home soon with the kids.

One hour later, she pulled into the driveway. I was still cleaning.

In the end, my two-hour estimate turned into more like

seven hours. I was still cleaning while she made her kids dinner, gave them baths, and put them to bed. But somehow, with a throbbing head, no AC, and only glass cleaner, a sponge, and a used toilet scrubber, I got through that entire house.

When I was done, it looked okay. Not great, but better than it did before. She paid me, and I left.

I thought that was the end of the story.

But really, it was just the beginning.

—

The next day, two hours after I left the mall triumphantly holding my new jeans, a funny thing happened. The woman who had hired me called again.

I was afraid she'd found the mildew I'd covered up with a shampoo bottle, so I let it go to voice mail. (How millennial of me.) But she wasn't calling to complain. Her message sounded something like this: "Hi, Kristen! Hope you're having a great day. Just wanted to touch base and see if we could set up a weekly schedule? I could really use the help."

It had never occurred to me that this could be more than a one-time thing. I decided I would love to have an extra \$99 a week, so I started cleaning her house every Wednesday.

She was kind enough to let me use her products and teach me how she preferred things to be cleaned. I befriended the dogs and finally figured out the mystery of the glass stove top. (Use the clearly marked bottle of "glass stove top cleaner" under the kitchen sink.) Life was good.

Then she started telling her friends about me, and then they told their friends, who told *their* friends. As if that weren't crazy enough, I also forgot to take down the Craigslist ad. I woke up each morning to a few emails from people who wanted to hire me.

Some of these requests were a little weirder than others. One person asked me if I cleaned S&M playgrounds, and I said yes because I had no idea what those were. I showed up and quickly realized that I *did not* clean S&M playgrounds.

Another one emailed:

Hello Kristen,

What do you wear while cleaning? I'm not asking for sex, please don't get it wrong, but if you have some naughty clothes to wear while cleaning and are willing to wear those, we can discuss the details. You can come with one or two other friends if you want. Hope to hear from you soon.

I quickly declined. I didn't need another pair of jeans that badly.

Not all the inquiries were from creeps, though. I slowly started cleaning for more and more clients and found myself making pretty decent money. But it was physically exhausting: I cleaned before class, after class, even on the weekends.

I needed help.

I had a few friends who were broke, as I had been. I offered them jobs, but they refused. (Probably shouldn't have told them about the S&M guy.) So I decided to post an ad

on Facebook. It read: “Fast cash, you pick your hours.” From that I hired my first employee, Cacee.

Cacee was a sophomore at UF studying agricultural education and communication. She needed to make about \$300 a month. Her reply to my ad ended with “I hope I’m what you are looking for! I’m a very dependable, responsible and clean person. Just looking for a job that can fit this hectic school schedule.”

I told Cacee I would start her at minimum wage and give her raises as her performance got better, which was an idea I’d seen online somewhere.

Our first client together was memorable, to say the least. When we walked into the house, I thought I had stepped into a petting zoo. There were bunnies hopping around; a turtle was crossing the foyer; there were dogs barking, cats meowing, ducks waddling—and there was animal poop. Lots of poop. Everywhere.

There was also a baby crawling on the floor. A *human* baby.

The place smelled absolutely horrible. Black gunk, which we later figured out was tobacco, seeped from the walls. In the kitchen, I went to rest my hand on what appeared to be a dark countertop. As soon as my palm touched the surface, a billion fruit flies flew into the air, and I realized the counter was actually white. I looked at Cacee, and her face was starting to turn white too.

I motioned for her to come outside with me, as I told the client we needed to get more supplies out of the car.

We walked out the front door, coughing and gasping for

air. At the same time, we looked at each other and said, "Let's leave."

We got in the car and peeled out. I thought Cacee was going to quit, but amazingly, she didn't. Instead, she said we should call Child Protective Services. So I called. And then I called the client and told them I reported them.

I liked Cacee. She was fearless.

Business continued to grow after that, and Cacee started making well beyond her requested \$300 paycheck. After just a couple months, we had eight regular clients, and we were cleaning houses together about five days per week. We eventually had to split up so we could take on more jobs as the requests kept coming in.

I ended up hiring a couple of other students to help Cacee and me. That's when it occurred to me that I didn't need to clean as much. Instead, I could handle all the incoming requests, schedule my employees to clean, and work on getting us more customers. Classes would be ending soon because summer was approaching, and my employees were about to have a lot of free time on their hands. They told me they wanted to use it to make more money. I certainly wasn't against that idea: I needed to save every penny I could for the Manhattan apartment of my dreams.

I created a flyer advertising our cleaning services, made some copies, and took them to different student apartment complexes around town. I figured if I put the advertisement in the leasing office, a resident might see it and call for a cleaning.

The first place I went to was a complex where a few of

my friends lived. I showed my flyers to Michael, the property manager. He agreed to hang up a couple, noting that my prices were surprisingly low. As I started to leave (intending to go home and make new flyers with higher prices), Michael said, “Hey, wait—I have an opportunity for you.

“In the summer, there’s a three-week period when most students move out of their apartments, and all the units have to be cleaned before the new residents move in,” he explained. “It’s a very short time frame, and we have trouble finding cleaning companies that can handle all the work. You should hire a ton of people, and then I could pay your company to do it.”

My lucky day.

“Email me, and we can set up a time to talk about a contract,” he said.

I grabbed his business card, got in my car, rolled the windows down, and blasted music all the way home. *This is going to be the best summer ever*, I thought to myself.

Well, it was pretty great . . . for a little while.

—

As the glass doors closed on the last of my now-ex-employees, I sat alone in the clubhouse utterly dumbstruck. For a few minutes, I couldn’t comprehend what had happened.

After the shock wore off, my mind started racing: Had I done something wrong? Had I not prepared them properly for the horrors of the job? Should I have checked on them?

My self-doubt soon escalated to anger. I started to pace around the room.

How dare they commit to working and then just drop everything and leave? I am paying them. I didn't have to give them this job. If they didn't want it, why did they even apply in the first place?

But my anger gave way to panic when the full magnitude of the problem hit me: My company was still contracted to clean *hundreds* of apartments, and so far, the team—all sixty of them—had done only a few dozen. I had just fifteen employees left to finish the work, and we had only a couple weeks before all the units had to be spotless. Period.

I started to cry, not knowing what the heck I was going to do. For a brief second, I thought about calling my parents for advice, but I didn't want to freak them out. I also thought about telling the client that I couldn't fulfill my end of the deal, but I didn't want to ruin my reputation.

That left me with two choices: I could go out and hire forty-five new people—which, in a city with thousands of students who needed summer jobs, would be possible but time-consuming—or I could go back to those forty-five people who quit and try to persuade them to give me another chance.

Plan B sounded faster, and I needed *fast*.

I left the clubhouse to go in search of the fifteen remaining people, who clearly hadn't gotten the "Let's all quit together" memo. I caught them just in time. Judging by the miserable looks on their faces when I found them, they weren't exactly loving the job either. I told them what happened with the rest of the team, and I must have come off as pretty desperate because they volunteered to drop every-

thing and help me try to win the others back. (Or maybe it was that helping me sounded way better than cleaning.) We gathered in an empty apartment and quickly divided the forty-five names and phone numbers among us. We each found a surface to sit on—floors, countertops, windowsills—and called each person on the list *begging* them to come to an emergency meeting at my house that night. To get everyone to show up, I promised early paychecks for the work they'd done so far—and pizza. *Lots* of pizza.

Several hours later, the forty-five who had quit—and the fifteen who had helped me make the calls—were all cramming themselves into my small living room.

As I waited for them to get settled, I started pacing up and down the hallway, thinking about what I would say. I had concentrated so much on getting them here that I hadn't planned what I would do if they all actually showed up. Nothing in any of my business classes had prepared me for a situation like *this*. I was so nervous I was shaking.

I figured I should apologize, but I wasn't sure what to apologize *for*. In my eyes, I had done the things I thought bosses were supposed to do: I'd found work, hired people, and then stood by in case they needed me. But clearly, as evidenced by forty-five people essentially giving me the finger, I'd missed something.

Heart beating out of my chest, I walked out to face the roomful of sixty near strangers who, at the moment, weren't sure what to expect. I squeezed myself into the only free space left in the front of my living room, trying not to step

on anyone. Then I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and started talking.

“I’m sorry,” I began, voice trembling a little.

They were barely making eye contact with me.

“It’s my first time managing something as big as this, and . . . I’m not really sure what I’m doing.”

A few started to look up. I took that as a sign to keep going.

“Actually, I have no clue what I’m doing. And I’m freaking out. These apartments have to get done, and I can’t do it without your help. I need each and every one of you.”

It was as if they could sense I was on the verge of a panic attack. They began putting away their cell phones and gave me their complete attention.

Come on, Kristen. Say something.

“I know cleaning can suck sometimes. Trust me, I’ve been in your shoes, and it’s hard work.”

A few chuckled, as if they didn’t believe the freshly manicured boss from the clubhouse could bring herself to scrub a toilet.

“I promise you, I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty,” I said, determined to convince them I was serious. “I’ll prove it: I’ll clean with you. We only have a couple weeks left and then it’s over. We can do it together.”

The room was quiet.

“Please give me another chance. Please.”

Finally someone spoke up.

“All right, Kristen,” came a voice from somewhere near

my couch. "I'll come back if you take care of the moldy refrigerator in 208."

"Done," I said quickly. Small price to pay.

I noticed a few smiles around the room.

"How about that fan covered in black dust in 106?" another called out. "It'll rain dirt on you."

"Bring it on!" I cheered.

Whatever I was doing was working. The room was suddenly filled with laughter as people began to shout out increasingly ridiculous assignments for me, including scrubbing an entire kitchen floor with a toothbrush. I accepted every one.

"So does this mean you guys are coming to work tomorrow?" I hollered over the noise. I didn't want to kill the mood, but I kinda needed to know.

"Why wait until tomorrow?!" someone hollered back. "Let's go tonight! Before she changes her mind!"

And that's exactly what we did: We left my house that night and went right back to the apartment complex where most of the team had walked out on me just hours earlier. Luckily they were kidding about most of their requests, but I kept my word that I would help them.

For the next couple weeks, I jumped into the trenches with my team. I went from apartment to apartment, getting sweaty and smelly as I helped them clean, giving them high fives (and bottled water). I got to work early each day so I could be there to greet them, and I was the last to leave at night, walking each of them to their cars after they clocked out.

Most days we cleaned for eighteen hours straight. Not one person quit. And we finished our work early.

Early.

The managers of the apartment complex couldn't believe it. They were so impressed that they told me they'd already decided they wanted to hire us again next year. I ended up making a small profit, and my employees did pretty well themselves.

But what I was most proud of was winning back those forty-five people. In retrospect, I'm actually glad they walked out on me that summer. "The 45"—as I affectionately refer to them now—taught me one of the most important lessons I've ever learned: Leadership isn't sitting in an air-conditioned clubhouse with your feet propped up.

—

When the apartment contract came to an end, dozens of those I'd hired told me they wanted to keep working with me, and I realized that's what I wanted too: to continue with this crazy thing I'd started. I did it partially because I'd gotten a lot closer with the team during those last few weeks and I didn't have the heart to tell them they'd need to find other jobs.

But there was also something incredibly exciting about what I was doing. Running this business was far more interesting than anything I'd learned in my finance classes. I also suspected it was far more satisfying than a buy-as-many-jeans-as-you-want \$100K investment-banker salary could

ever be. So at the start of my senior year of college, I continued to look for cleaning work to keep us busy.

Luckily for me, I had no idea how hard building my company would be. Had I known what I was in for, there's no way I would've actually gone through with it. There's no class in business school called "Sh*t Is Going to Get Crazy 101."

If someone had told me when I started college that I would give up my dream of working on Wall Street after graduation to grow a cleaning business instead, I would have laughed my head off.

Now I laugh at myself for ever thinking I would have made a good investment banker.

—

My company has employed hundreds of students since I posted my first Craigslist ad in 2007.

When I tell people about what I do, the reaction I usually get is "How on earth do you get *millennials* to *clean*?" They act as if I've perfected a recipe for Gen Y Kool-Aid that they can't wait to get their hands on. National news outlets like Fox, PBS, and *Forbes* have published stories about my company because it's an anomaly: How can a business that requires hard, humbling, mundane work limit its hiring pool to a generation with a reputation for being entitled, lazy, and apathetic—and *survive*?

I get why people are so shocked by what I've managed to do and why they are so eager to know the secret. Millennials, born between 1982ish and 2004ish, are the largest gen-

eration in U.S. history and will make up 75 percent of the workforce by 2025. Business leaders especially are desperate to understand what makes millennials tick because millennials will determine the future success of their organizations.

As a millennial myself, I'm well versed in the stereotypes attached to my generation, which is often nicknamed "The Unemployables" and "Special Snowflakes." Rumor has it that we have no interest in paying our dues at the bottom and yet expect to rise straight to the top. People say we would rather send novel-length texts than subject ourselves to face-to-face conversation and that we are so thin-skinned when it comes to critical feedback that our supervisors walk on eggshells around us. They claim we refuse to stay in jobs where we don't feel like we are making an "impact" . . . despite the fact that we can't describe what making one would actually look like.

The stereotypes aren't entirely bogus. I've encountered plenty of students in my company who embody these descriptions to a T. But I've also met plenty of others who don't. The same goes for *every* generation: These days we occasionally hire seventeen- and eighteen-year-old high school students, who are referred to as Gen Z, and from time to time we've even employed baby boomers. (Who says you have to be young to be a student?) Like millennials, some of them fit their generational molds and some of them don't.

The point is that having a mostly millennial team has never been my biggest challenge in leading my company. What I know now that I didn't when I started this journey

is that I basically chose the most difficult business model in the entire world.

First of all, we hire only students, which, regardless of whether they are millennials, comes with its own unique set of obstacles. A student workforce means that we have to accommodate class schedules, extracurriculars, internships, and a lot of “sudden illnesses” around spring break. It also means a mass exodus at the end of each semester: Our team members leave the company when they graduate from school.

Then there’s the nature of the work we do. Seven days a week we have teams cleaning homes, offices, schools, condos, clinics, gyms, fraternity houses—you name it—at all hours of the day and sometimes into the night. Cleaning isn’t particularly glamorous or fun; scrubbing and scouring someone else’s mess can be downright disgusting, not to mention physically grueling. And forget about competitive pay: The average profit margin of a cleaning company is just 15 percent. We can barely afford to pay our students any more than minimum wage. They could easily earn larger paychecks making lattes or selling trendy clothes at a mall (both of which, I think, sound a lot more appealing). It’s no surprise to me that the cleaning industry has an average turnover rate of 75 percent (meaning for every one hundred people hired, seventy-five quit).

As if that weren’t enough, cleaning businesses tend to have low retention rates when it comes to clients too. The average company loses up to 55 percent of its customers annually because of poor-quality work. To have any chance of

beating that statistic, companies need to make a significant investment in employee training . . . which they usually can't afford (15 percent profit margin, remember?).

I have no clue why anyone would consciously (or willingly) get into this business.

But this is the business that chose me.

Leading my company is an uphill battle. Most days I feel like I *still* haven't figured it all out, more than a decade later.

But this is what I do know.

People of all generations apply to work with us.

Our students love their jobs. Some love working with us so much that they have turned down higher-paying opportunities to stick around long term and help the company grow.

Our environment builds leaders: Many of our former team members leave with skills and confidence in themselves they didn't have when they came in, and they go off to start their own companies or are recruited for positions that by all accounts they shouldn't be ready for.

Our customers are happy because our people are happy. We don't even have to pay for advertising.

And it's all thanks to the extraordinary amount of screwing up I've done over the years.

I didn't learn how to create a place like this overnight. I didn't just run into a few hiccups and then experience runaway success. The moment The 45 walked out on me—and every other moment I failed as a leader after that—taught me something new, something that helped me make my company into what it is today. This book shares the hard-

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won leadership lessons I've learned since that day in the clubhouse. It's more about what I got wrong than what I got right. It's the story of the messes I made and how I cleaned them up.

This book is for anyone who wants to be a better leader, no matter your industry. No matter who you are or what your position is. No matter where you stand on the totem pole. No matter how young or how old you are. No matter how challenging your job is, no matter how badly your company culture sucks.

I hope my story will make you less afraid to screw up (a lot) by showing you that sometimes mistakes can be the best lessons. But most of all I hope it inspires you to keep going even on your toughest days. Even the days when you want to quit.

Even the days when forty-five people decide to quit on *you*.